

The Slaver

BY JOHN RUSSELL

Fate and Dreams of Gold That Stirred Four Ruthless Wanderers to Cruelty and Crime

SHE had learned her trade before the American war. And again before the Brazilian emancipation of '71 she had drifted back to the same hateful traffic, until driven by stress of weather or British cruisers to try the west coast, where she took refuge among the mangrove swamps of the Guayas. So the legend ran. It was certain that she was very old, and had served many unsavory masters. Her last owner was a Babahoyo planter, who drank himself to death in her cabin one night and left her to rot at his rotting wharf. Since that she had been shunned, for ships are like folks; their ill repute grows sinister with age.

Early one rainy season occurred the famous gold discovery on the western shoulders of Chimborazo, where a sheep herder lost his flock and found riches in the sudden spate of a mountain stream. It drew to Ecuador some scores of those rovers on the outskirts that seek, hungrily, the fat chance and the easy profit.

Early in April a first consignment of gold dust was ready for transport from the diggings on the coast. The gold came down through the foothills on mule back, and at the head of navigation was transported to a little stern-wheel river steamer under guard for the run to Guayaquil. It never reached Guayaquil, and the river steamer was never seen again, nor any of the crew, nor the guard. But four of the passengers, men who had passed that way as prospectors a month before, and were then returning empty-handed, continued their journey down the Babahoyo to the Guayas. And the gold dust went with them.

At twilight a small canoe might have been observed to thread the passage toward the old wharf. Those aboard it had to bail as they paddled. At the bend they came in suddenly, of the little schooner.

"Did I lie or didn't I—tell me that?" demanded a voice of hoarse triumph. An active figure leapt from the bow of the canoe into the channels of the Jorguina, and held a hand to steady the next below.

"Yes; but will she float?" mumbled the other. "She's built like a dead dog."

A third man, tall, scrambled past them both, and bounded aboard like a thing on wires.

"All serene, Brewer, my son," he hissed. "A ship—with no deck. Faith, it's whole and dry at least."

"Oh, a life on the ocean wave,

A home on the rolling deep—"

He danced a step.

"Merry!" he sang, and collapsed against the rail.

The second began to complain in husky exasperation.

"Another fool that's no sort of use! Say, you think I'm going to hoist all d' swag alone? An' d' cance, she be sunk in a minute!" The little craft spun and ducked under his clumsy feet.

"Easy all, Chrisip," said the first, more quietly. "I'll give you a lift."

Hereupon they emptied the canoe, shifting sacks and bundles to the schooner's deck, until the dusk overtook them there.

"Where's that blame' lantern?" demanded Brewer suddenly. "And where's George?" he added.

"George!" they bawled in chorus, and the jingle gave them back the word until an illuminating sentence floated up. "Drunk, an' asleep down there!"

"Let 'im sink," advised Chrisip bitterly, but Brewer climbed down again and rescued a limp and dripping form.

"Let him sink," it muttered. "Let me sink. I'd—rather sink. I shot two of 'em swimming away, and they made bubbles—red bubbles in the water."

"You sit down and shake yourself together," growled Brewer. "One drink, mind—no more."

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CHRISPIM struck a light and the lantern drew them into a ring. They were a scraggy lot, types all more or less recognizable of the tramp. Their flushed faces and wide gestures betrayed the kind of heartening they had had for a job beyond their natural compass.

Only Brewer, their leader, came nearest the tough breed of buccaneer times. Ruddy skin and strong white teeth, an open and bold expression gave him an appearance of genial force until it was seen that his eyes were too full and were far apart, his features thickened by the stamp of abnormality. Straightaway he had found a handskep and set to making busy clatter at the pump.

"Ah, that's right! You come holler to us because the boy run away. Didn't I tell you two, three, twenty times he is no good? Only let me catch 'em!"

"I let 'em atop of the transom there last night—four of 'em, in plain sight. You can see for yourselves—why you lads been playin' any tricks among you—"

Chrisip rose like a prodded buffalo.

"Ah, that's right! You come holler to us because the boy run away. Didn't I tell you two, three, twenty times he is no good? Only let me catch 'em!"

"Well!"

George raised a lusterless gaze.

"The sick," he murmured.

"Is 't so?" growled Chrisip. I know."

But they wondered still more when they came to paw about the bunk. George had no gold dust with him—seemed not even to understand their angry questioning.

"Chris, where'd you sleep?" challenged Brewer.

"Me? I'll be here in d' doorway. What? Don't you say I done it?"

"Charlie—"

"Come off it! I slept beside Chris."

"Whoever he is," scowled Brewer. "I can tell him now this little joke won't do him any good."

"Whoever he is," echoed Dibdin.

Brewer turned upon him.

"Are you gettin' at me? You don't think if I wanted to be crooked with you chaps I couldn't do better than that?"

"Yes, but d' gold is gone," Chrisip interceded.

It was undeniable—a leather sack like a plump sausages, weighing some thirty pounds, and worth possibly \$10,000.

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So they started their search of the Jorguina. They made quick work of her bare cabin. In the forward bulkhead a low open panel gave entrance down a pair of steps on the hold. They stood peering into that obscure cavern, dark and ill-smelling. On either side they described a narrow shelf running the length, and Brewer rattled a set of rusty shackles bolted to a beam.

"Slave quarters. See that? They used to pack 'em in spoon fashion—by layers."

"Do you mean niggers?"

"I heard so in Babahoyo." Brewer became grimly speculative.

"How many black souls must ha' passed out through this panel?

"Oh," snarled Chrisip, rousing. "And wha' would we be doing?"

"You can take your shares of the dust; they're all correct in the leather bags," said Brewer amiably. "This is no strong-arm play. Only tonight is my get-away—understand? It's

a great summer resort hereabouts, isn't it? You'd like it, Charlie, without our rum. And George—he'd be comfortable, hidin' in a swamp. There's an old plantation back somewhere. Vacant, they tell me, except for devils and night walkers and such." He swung round on the stout one. "You wouldn't be at all lone-some, Chris."

Brewer had the measure of Chrisip—a scullion by his trade, a Porto Santo Portuguese, dull and malignant. "Devils?" he stammered. "Forest devils, the natives say. It looks proper home for 'em among these queer places—what?"

There was no wind, the flame of their rude lantern stood straight as a nail, yet a chill air came and passed as if a great black wing had brushed them. The wilderness pressed in with strange sounds and scents. They shrank from it—even the cynical Brewer himself—from its unclean sweepiness.

"George, go back to his feet. For sakes, what are we doing here?" he cried, swaying. "Let's get out of this hole. They're bound to be after us; and it's—it's awful here—so deathly—and alive, too! We got to run—run—keep running! Let's get away. Let's get out!"

Dibdin nodded with a drunken man's sudden groan.

"George, I believe you're right. It does seem a bit crowded for pleasure; besides, docid unhealthy. And as for devils, d'y see?" he reached for the rum gourd—"I got enough of my own."

So at the last they were all waiting for Chrisip. He stayed half-kneeling, but there was no defiance about him now. Under his breath he called some forgotten saint, and his face, turned upward in the splash of yellow lantern light, was awed and stricken. And following his gaze, they could see what he saw—the stubby foretop of the vessel lined sharp against the fading sky. It made a sign above them there to speed their voyage, an omen-like a cross, as it might have been—like the frame of a gallows! If they cared to take it so. "Sagrada Familia!" he mumbled. "If only we don't carry none of them devils along wit' us!"

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NO man saw her go. At midnight the weather broke with seasonal tropic rains. Some scraps of wet and rising gusts; she fled like a ragged wraith. It was close on dawn before she found another inlet among the mangroves where she could lie up in hiding, and her crew, drenched and stupefied, could fall asleep on her sloping deck.

"Well," said Brewer at length as they stood by the transom, "we'll every one take his own share to keep by him, won't we? Too bad George should ha' dropped his bit, ain't it?"

"Careless of him, I call it," said Dibdin.

They settled the incident on that basis.

The second night gave them some hours of starlight, by which they made all speed, with a pair of clumsy sweeps, so that dawn saw them crossing the river bar thirty-five miles below Guayaquil. Before they slept again they were comfortably headed open sea.

The second day Charlie Dibdin awoke a poorer man by some \$10,000. "Sing about it," advised Chrisip, grinning like an ape. "It don't sound so good when you talk."

Dibdin cursed him in a spurt of acid fury until Brewer cut across and doused the fire.

"Say you make me quit? Will you check me out, even when Dibdin has a mummy with him, a military set to his thin shoulders? Do you hear me say my gold is stolen—the price of my wading in this ruddy mess? Faith, there'll be more than a word to it before the pair of you rob me even before the sun goes down!"

"Gentlemen of leisure," he observed, "ain't you beginnin' pretty early? I tell you straight, you get no pamperin' on any ship with me! It don't go—understand! Once we're through the others into consciousness. They can snivel all you like, but till we are—you jump, get that?"

They roused themselves languidly, but when they sat to breakfast on the hatch a little later he sprang off the first bombshell of surprise.

"Say, who's th' funny bloke around here?" he began gruffly. "Where's George?"

"Faith, have you lost that youngster again?" inquired Dibdin. "Don't tie you up him up?"

"I'll tie him fast enough if he had a hand in this," declared Brewer. "One of them bags of gold dust is gone!"

Here was a word to jolt them out of lethargy.

"I left 'em atop of the transom there last night—four of 'em, in plain sight. You can see for yourselves—why you lads been playin' any tricks among you—"

Chrisip stared at the bag that had been thrust into his hands.

"This isn't mine!"

"No," said Brewer, sneering. "It's mine; but this is no time for scrapin'! I'm satisfied to keep the bag with all deposits, you see. Why, you poor, blame' fools, how would you guess anybody could get away with anything out here?"

They had only to blink over the rail to know what he meant. The coast was no more than a line in the east; the Jorguina swung to the broad rhythm of the Pacific. Their

Brewer tripped them both on a long arm and exhibited three red spots above the wrist. On inspection they showed like bright bruises, the kind that might be made with a vaccination lance, as if the skin had been scraped to the capillaries. "I'm covered with it, and so is Chris. And we can't—by Jove, we can't do without it!"

"It's just here," said Brewer amiably, "where it's been right along—fattenin' up from the rum."

He held up the loosened light of rum and pointed back and astern at an inconspicuous canoe, littered with rubbish, which had been trailing behind the schooner from the start, to which none of his companions had even given a thought.

"I mean to," said Brewer.

Swift suspicion struck a very different note from Singing Charlie.

"Without me?"

The other nodded.

"And—the bank? By Jove, you'd never go without it—never tell me you would! You were doing us, after all! You got the gold, too!"

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"I mean to," said Brewer.

He stopped, open-mouthed.

"What's wrong with the ship?" Dibdin went on between a gulp and a giggle. "I've been down below again—inside, through the fo'c'sle. I meant to sink her; she haunted me so!" He showed a smoking torch of tattered oakum. "Faith, I meant to sink her and the whale cursed out—I saw her!"

Brewer made an abrupt movement.

"What's wrong with the ship?" Dibdin asked again.

Brewer fought for comfort to the death.

"Chris—"

The Portuguese sat crouched against the rail. He had a word that summed the terror between patterning tags.

"Take your pick and name your pleasure," returned Brewer, in curt abstraction.

"Is that all you can say?"

"Why not? I can say that gold is still aboard this ship. Where else would it be? I ain't worryin' As to who's been stackin' it up for us dunnin', and I wish him joy of the amusement until this blasted voyage is over and times comes to collect."

"Somebody did it."

"Somebody," agreed Brewer. "Maybe it was Chris here, he looks guilty. Or you, Charlie. Maybe it was me. Maybe," he added, "it was somebody—or something else."

"George," suggested Chrisip.

"Where is George," demanded Dibdin, "anyway?"

"A question," answered Brewer, with one of his twisted smiles. "But he hasn't taken the dust with him."

And when they went below to investigate, the others felt quite reassured on that point—for George was dead.

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IN an angry flush. "Some blame' thing's gone wrong with this job of ours, and who'll deny it? I never reckoned to put it through without trouble—some kind of trouble. But you can bet I reckoned to put it through. We got to last four days more before we make a port. That's all I know or want to know now."

Dibdin turned for comfort to the death.

"Chris—"

CHARLIE and the Portuguese agreed to stand watch and watch between them in the cabin that night.

To make it less tedious they branched from stock a second jug of rum.

"There's a sweet little cherub that sits up aloft

To keep watch for the life of poor Jack!"

So Dibdin melodiously declared; but there could have been little watching done, for at daybreak the two stumbled out in a furious tangle—their two remaining bags had disappeared with the rest!

The wind had freshened; they found Brewer already at the wheel, oddly subdued and constrained, a set-faced figure in the morning light. He told the news very quietly.

"Gone, is it? Well, that makes a clean sweep with us."

"And stow your gab, can't you?"

Brewer stood aside for Chrisip, but the fussy fellow showed no eagerness about entering.

"You go," he offered.

Brewer himself shook his head, with a twisted hint of a smile.

"I'm just as willin' to leave it to you," he said.